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ABSTRACT

In the twentieth century, both the need and the opportunities for acquiring a foreign language have greatly increased. However, even today, foreign language instruction has not been firmly established worldwide as an essential element of basic education. In Great Britain, enthusiasm for foreign language instruction has risen and fallen repeatedly. Currently, there is an acute shortage of trained language teachers. Insularity, coupled with reliance on English in foreign countries, have caused foreign language learning to be neglected. Although the situation is improving, it is worst in the elementary schools, for economic and political reasons. Early second language instruction is desirable for several reasons: (1) it increases the number of years in which the language can be learned at school; (2) young children are able to learn a foreign language and enjoy it, and may be better at learning pronunciation; (3) if the teaching is appropriate, children discover that learning another language is within their capacity, and this knowledge strengthens their motivation; and (4) second language learning reduces ethnocentricity and creates a more international outlook and better understanding of people who speak other languages. (Author/MSE)

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An early beginning : why make an exception of languages ?

What I propose to re-consider in this session is the desirability, and practicability, of making an early start with the classroom teaching and learning of foreign languages. Since this conference is concerned with the teaching and learning of English, I suppose we should forget languages other than English. I can't bring myself to do that. It seems useful and necessary to consider the early teaching of languages in general, even though English is the chief example internationally.

Let's ask what the case is for and against the introduction of a foreign language at primary level, that is to say before children are about eleven, and let us ask further what conditions need to be fulfilled if this is to be done successfully. The idea is not of course a new one: from time to time, and in many places. there has been primary school teaching of languages. But the year is 1988: soon the twentieth century will be behind us. What should we try to do for the children who will inherit the future which is being created for them ?

First, however. it would be wise to take a look at the present situation as it has developed (or failed to develop) over the last three or four decades. That, I submit, is a very short period indeed, as history goes, and a short period in the development of language teaching.[1] Looking back even farther than that, I recall that at seven or eight years of age, brought up in the countryside very near London (England), I had no suspicion that any language existed other than English,

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1) For the history of English teaching, at least in Europe, see A.P. Howatt's excellent 'A History of English Language Teaching' (OUP, 1984), which reveals, along with very much else, a remarkable discontinuity (as well as some continuity) of thought on language teaching over the centuries.

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which everybody without exception spoke: the concept 'a language/languages' was beyond me. The same was true of the other 'scholars', as school children were then called. We were taught about foreign countries but somehow languages were left out of the picture. Only important people, we gathered, made journeys outside Britain. Few people had a telephone and very few had radio; television had not been invented; nobody had flown the Atlantic. I never heard any non-native speaker of English, so far as I can remember, until I started making my own 'crystal sets' (a primitive form of radio receiver) at the age of fifteen, nor met any such speaker until I had left secondary school.

It was not of course the same everywhere: in several parts of Europe (for instance, Alsace, the Netherlands and Belgium, Austria, Hungary, and especially Switzerland) there had long been so intimate a mingling of peoples and nationalities that foreign-language acquisition, both inside and outside school, was taken for granted. The same was true of parts of Africa and Asia. Nowadays the areas of contact and intermingling have come to be the rule rather than the exception almost everywhere, and most though not all of us meet with foreign languages on our very doorstep or can summon them by turning on the radio. We are living in a different world, and a linguistically more crowded world.

Large-scale changes of this kind develop unevenly. Once the privilege (in many areas) of the well-to-do, foreign-language learning was assumed to be unnecessary or unsuitable for ordinary folk, and **is** still not so firmly established, even in those many countries which enjoy universal education extending over a decade or more, as the so-called 'core' activities — science, mathematics, history, geography, the native language, etc. During this century (in Britain, for example) there have been waves of enthusiasm for foreign-language teaching

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and troughs of relative indifference. For some years (here in Britain) we have been down in a trough and language teaching has declined. For complex reasons there is now an acute shortage of language teachers. (I refer you to Eric Hawkins's recent article, in the winter issue (Vol. 25, No.3) of The British Journal of Language Teaching. Hawkins supplies figures indicating that the modern-language graduates who applied for training as language teachers on PGCE courses in England and Wales fell by more than three-quarters between 1969 and 1986.)

It is easy to recognise that insularity, geographical and social, has been one of the causes of Britain's notorious indifference, at least in the past, to general modern-language teaching. Military conquest and the ensuing trade made English a world language. and the widespread availability of English as a means of communication supports the attitude that perhaps there is no great need to bother much with other languages: 'a phrase-book will see me through'. This goes well with an assumption - semi-conscious, no doubt - that 'foreigners', however agreeable they may be, are really second-class citizens. It takes a long time to shake off the mental heritage of imperialism: the ghost of it persists in hanging around.

During the twentieth century things have of course changed a lot. There is now an effective world-wide (though still expensive) oral network of communication by phone. Radio and TV are additional sources of information (accurate and inaccurate) about other countries. News of cruelty and violence, and more seldom very good news, is quickly and widely disseminated. To an increasingly but not yet universal extent, all but the poorest travel abroad now and then, getting by in English (or perhaps some other lingua franca). These are familiar facts. We are one world, or steadily becoming so, even if we don't often admit it.

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What effect does this have on language teaching? It is normally easier now than it used to be to start learning to speak another language, and to make progress with it, in part because of better audio-visual aids and easier travel. Yet in Britain (and other places) the belief still lingers on that foreign-language learning is an extra, something that does not quite qualify as a 'core' subject, something not of major importance even at secondary school, something that can safely be omitted from primary-school education.

Foreign-language teaching in this country — leaving aside the teaching of English to immigrants and to students over here temporarily to improve their English — is in the doldrums. Not merely is there a serious shortage of language teachers, but the sole language now offered by most secondary schools is French. Since 1967/68 the universities have not required a foreign-language qualification for entry to degree courses. As Eric Hawkins points out: 'They chose to do this just at the moment when Britain was negotiating to join the European Economic Community'.[2)]

The situation is at its worst in the primary schools, some of which benefited temporarily from a revival of interest in language teaching which culminated in the sixties, when a pilot scheme for introducing French to eight-year-old children was set up. Among the organisers were the Inspectorate of Schools, the Nuffield Foundation, and certain local authorities, and 125 primary schools took part. The experiment was evaluated by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), which was asked whether 'any substantial gain in mastery was achieved' by beginning French at eight. The NFER came up (in Primary French in the Balance 1974) with the much-quoted verdict that the only area in which the eight-year-olds showed superiority (over the eleven-year-old beginners) by the time they reached sixteen was that of 'listening comprehension'. However, another

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2) Cf. Hawkins, E.: Modern Languages in the Curriculum, CUP, 1981. Revised edition, 1987, p.10.

significant point was also conceded, namely, that they retained on the whole 'a more favourable attitude toward speaking the language' than those who were not introduced to French until they were eleven.

To some it may appear that what happened 14 years ago can have only minor relevance today, but this is surely not so. The report received at the time immediate large-scale and misleading publicity, especially in the popular press, where banner headlines such as 'Le parlez-vous is out' appeared. Many local authorities, faced at that time (as they still are) with financial problems, jumped at the opportunity of not having to take primary-school language teaching on board; and in the flood of misunderstanding and prejudice the arks of education floated off for the most part without it. The result is that in present-day Britain there is very little such teaching of foreign languages in the public sector; in the private sector it is different. The conclusions of the report also had some effect outside Britain, and especially in Europe, wherever projects for early language teaching (especially of English) were under consideration.

The NFER report was rich in detail and can still be read with profit. It is particularly valuable because of the light it throws on children's attitudes towards various aspects of language learning. Yet it is seriously flawed, as was pointed out in a number of critical articles published soon afterwards. (See the bibliography below.) By contrast with the report itself, these (even the constructive Hoy survey of 1977, on behalf of the Nuffield Foundation) received no publicity: they did not support a policy of retraction.

Briefly, the weakness of this influential report, still sometimes referred to as if it had settled the matter once and for all, was that the comparison made between the achievements

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by the age of sixteen of (a) eight-year-old beginners and (b) eleven-year-old beginners was to a considerable extent invalid, since, firstly, many of the eight-year-olds, on reaching a secondary school, were taught in the same classes as eleven-year-old beginners; and secondly, there is little evidence of any continuity of teaching techniques when the primary-to-secondary transition was made (in other words, there was often no well planned and well implemented transition). Furthermore, how can it reasonably be argued that the value of language teaching is apparent only in its results as measured many years later? What lasting effect did the teaching have on learners' thoughts and attitudes at the time? Both the inspectorate and the primary and secondary teachers involved testified to being very favourably impressed with what was being achieved. So, it seems, were the majority of the children. Parents were not consulted, owing to lack of time and funds.

There are other points. but no opportunity and perhaps no need here and now to go into detail. I refer you to the bibliography and especially to P.H. Hoy's broad and well--documented survey, which covers other experiments too.

Even on the evidence presented by Primary French in the Balance itself, the main conclusion — that French should not be pursued in primary schools — seems to be unjustifiable. The report, conferring academic respectability on decisions rooted in financial duress, has helped to kill off plans to establish primary-school language teaching generally in the UK for almost a generation. A few local authorities, including West Sussex and Humberside, stood firm and defended the value of what they were doing. Today, French is also taught in some of the primary schools of Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, London, and Tameside (Manchester). In parts of the country, chiefly in the Midlands, where there are 'middle schools' which teach French, children of primary-school age are also to be found in French classes: this is true, for instance, of Bradford, Doncaster, and Leeds. Elsewhere (except in private preparatory schools) there is nothing.

By contrast, the situation outside Britain is very different. It would be an exaggeration, however, to say that primary school language teaching has gone from strength to strength. There has been much hesitation and reluctance, and more than one ambitious scheme to teach a foreign language from an early age has never got off the ground. My example is English, like French a lingua franca internationally, though on a larger scale. Up-to-date information is hard to obtain, but it seems that primary English is widely or partly established in Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, Finland, parts of the Federal Republic of Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan (in a minority of schools), the Netherlands, Hungary (experimentally, but even at nursery school level), Malaysia (from six), Norway, Poland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, and (from seven or eight) throughout Yugoslavia. Most frequently English is introduced in the last two primary years, but in a few countries (especially in Eastern Europe) the post-primary stage begins at thirteen. Furthermore, there appear to be few countries in which fee-paying English classes are not also available, and this applies where there is 'state' (i.e. public and free) provision as well as elsewhere. Parental demand for a foreign language, on behalf of their young children, is very great.

As far as primary education is concerned, the broad picture is that in many parts of the world a decision has been taken not to leave language learning out. The choice is often English, widely recognised as a useful language to have under one's belt in the struggle for a living. But let us remember that children (that is, the under-12s) are not themselves (except in a distant, unrealistic way) interested in jobs or diplomas. What positive reasons are there, in general, for beginning to teach children a foreign language, not necessarily English, before the secondary school stage, and what are the constraints on the validity of each? There appear to be four main reasons. (I am leaving out immigrants, whose main problems should ~~[illegible]~~ be dealt with separately.)

Reason 1 : an early start makes possible a long period of language learning, perhaps eight years. True, of course, except for holiday interruptions. True, also, that a foreign language is not learned quickly, unless it happens to be in everyday use in the local community. However, at this point, the term 'drip-feed learning' springs to mind. Drop by drop, over what seems to the learners an interminable length of time — is that the most interesting and effective way of learning? Little investigation of the effects of intensive but discontinuous periods of language teaching seems to have been made. Until there is more. we can doubtless assume, though with caution, that eight more or less continuous years are better than, say, five years. But does this not also depend, for example, on how interesting the learning activities are?

Reason 2 : young children, some people think, are particularly good language learners. However, this is doubtful, except no doubt for pronunciation. Research says no, but we cannot be sure. since there are many variables. For instance, older learners are rarely if ever taught in the same way as young learners; nor, commonly, in comparing the achievements of primary-age and much older learners, do we have in both cases a social cross-section: the much older class usually represents a minority, with a particular interest in or need for foreign--language learning. How many adult classes reflect a cross-section of the whole community, as primary-school classes often do?

It is no part of the case for an early beginning that young children are better or quicker at language learning than older learners. We do not know that. Nor is it part of the case against an early beginning that older learners are better or quicker than children, if indeed they are. To many people it seems obvious that older learners — adults at least — cope more effectively with arithmetic, science, history, geography, etc, and are better at learning to swim and jump (though are they?); yet nobody suggests that, if this is so, all these subjects and activities should be dropped from the primary school curriculum. They are rightly regarded as elements of the basic education which is a child's birthright.

Reason 3 — and here I quote again from the same Nuffield Report — children are 'likely to gain permanent benefit from a demonstration at an early age that, given the wish to do so, it is quite within their power to learn another person's language'. 'Such an experience', the report adds, 'is likely to be successful in the familiar and kindly environment of the primary classroom'. Familiar, yes (except for emigrants transplanted from a different culture), and let us hope kindly too. But more is needed: learner-based teaching methods adapted to the learners' interests, good audio-visual aids, short but frequent lessons, emphasis on oral communication; and above all (when the transition to secondary school arrives) close, friendly, and constructive consultation between the primary and secondary teachers involved, a rational allocation to classes where early beginners are not taught alongside late beginners, and an adequately worked-out continuity of teaching--learning procedures with the emphasis always on communicative success. Downward and upward mobility of the teachers between the two types of school can also be helpful. Underlying all this, a thorough, appropriate, and sustained scheme of teacher preparation is of course essential, for without it such a project will probably fail.

Finally, Reason 4, which is that the learning of a foreign language helps to prepare children for life in a multilingual world. 'At an age when children are favourably disposed towards other peoples', declares the Nuffield report (and I see this as the crucial point), 'the early teaching of modern languages helps to develop an international element in primary school activities'. H.H. Stern, in Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching (1983, 436) puts it in another way: '... the introduction of a language to young children can provide what many educators would regard as a worthwhile experience at that stage [Stern's italics] in a child's life. For .... at no stage in education should pupils be encouraged to believe that their native language is the only valid language'. In other words, early language learning helps to defeat a type of attitude peculiarly out of place in the modern world.

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Let me also, before concluding, refer to Peter Doyé's article (ELT Journal, 24, 1, 1979), 'Primary English : a research project'. Twelve hundred children in Lower Saxony were taught English for about seven years from the age of eight. On reaching secondary schools they were not put with children who were only just beginning. Teaching in all the schools concerned was co-ordinated. Achievement was significantly higher at the end of the fifth, sixth, and seventh years than for those who began only in the first secondary year. One comment made by the research team was that the inclusion of English in the primary school curriculum offers a chance of avoiding 'an ethnocentric and monocultural orientation'. This is probably its most welcome advantage.

I quote, in conclusion, Mirjana Vilke who, in Teaching Foreign Languages to the Very Young (1979) writes, of Yugoslav children who started learning a foreign language early: 'Their cultural outlook is wider than that of monolingual children, who often believe that their own culture, language, and customs are the only ones that matter in the world. The introduction of a foreign idiom into the child's world helps him to develop tolerance towards people different from him and in the long run contributes towards international understanding'. Apart from adding 'her' to 'him' I don't think I could put it better than that. This in my view is one of the best reasons for beginning to teach young children a foreign language.

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